"I can try it at least:" A Strategy for Effective Inter-Class Oral Communication

By Dong Taiqin

An effective conversation class involves the active participation by students to express orally and confidently what they have in mind. However, it is not rare in many schools, that students keep quiet all through the lesson while the teacher busily performs all by herself. Ironically, as soon as the bell rings for the end of the conversation class, the students burst out with a surging storm of talk in their mother tongue as if they have finally found an outlet for their voices.

It is difficult to motivate the students; and what frequently happens is the teacher waits while the students look up and down, to and fro with no sound made. In self-defense the teacher may think that a teacher-talk class fits a conversation class better than a *no-one-talks* class since at least someone is speaking.

How should conversation teachers handle situations like this? What can be done to change the lifeless classroom atmosphere? Where does the crux of the problem lie?

The following is a suggested technique which has helped my conversation classes and may work elsewhere.

Diagnostic test

Like a doctor examining his patients, the teacher needs to find out what makes students so quiet and passive. Conduct a survey and ask the students to check off those answers that apply to themselves. For example: Why don't you join your peers in discussion or speak up?

1. I'm at a loss as to what to say.
2. I'm not used to talking in class.
3. I'm afraid of making errors in class.
4. I'm not interested in the topic.
5. Other (specify)

Out of 25 students, 23 picked Nos. 1 and 3 as reasons for their silence. These two statements are actually closely related. If a student has no idea what to say, s/he may lose confidence and feel uncomfortable and make mistakes.

I'm at a loss as to what to say reveals the omission of an important step that the teacher should have included: s/he hasn't gotten the students ready for the task and is asking the students to do something beyond their reach. When someone thinks s/he is trying something impossible, it is easy to give up.

At this stage, students should be prepared both in terms of ideas and language. That means they should know basically what idea they want to convey and also how to say it.

A teacher-guided brainstorming session is useful for generating ideas on a given topic. For example, on the topic, A Wonderful Dance Party, the teacher can draw a sketch on the board and jot down information for the two boxes in Figure 1 below.

If possible the teacher can show the students some video tapes of a dance scene or play some music to create a similar atmosphere to achieve the same objective. After the students have worked out the ideas and come up with appropriate language, they have "warmed up" and are ready to fully participate.

I'm afraid of making errors may arise from several different causes. Ask the students to check one or more of the following options which apply.

a. I will leave a bad impression on the teacher.
b. I'm a timid person by nature and get nervous easily.
c. My vocabulary is limited and my pronunciation is poor.
d. My voice is not pleasant to hear.
e. I have some physiological deficiencies.
f. My classmates will laugh at me.
g. Other (specify)

Ninety-five percent of the students rank choice *f* at the top of the list followed by choices *a* and *b* . If we take a closer look at these three statements, we will soon realize that they are interrelated and all arise from the psychological factor of fear. By and large, they are a matter of self-esteem rather than related to the students' speaking competence. The teacher will have to remove this obstacle and dispel the student's apprehension. But how?

S.E.O.C.

As the students are afraid of making mistakes and losing or lowering their self-respect, why not have a stage called Survival English Oral Communication (S.E.O.C.) which means functionally accepted communication without consideration of accuracy.

In other words, so long as students can get their ideas across, they have completed the communicative process and have "survived." Here, a carefully planned Teaching Log Record will be necessary. The chart in Figure 2 below is a sample of such a record.

According to the above chart, each student will receive three scores. For column one, anyone who volunteers to speak up and gets the audience to understand him will receive a full score of five points, no matter how many errors he makes. On the other hand, if a student refuses to talk, he will lose five points. On the chart, student B may speak better than student C, but student C may score higher simply by taking the chance to talk. Here the emphasis is on "opening your mouth" in the spirit of "practice makes perfect." This arrangement has greatly encouraged my students to actively take part in oral discussions and presentations. The once shy, timid students who felt "unlucky" when the teacher called on them to do oral exercises, now have turned into students who "complain" when they do not have enough chances to speak. When the teacher clarifies his/her expectations at this stage, no one worries about errors. Instead, the students busily engage themselves in the different activities.

For a whole semester, I didn't have one student who failed in this column because of his/her timidness or the fact that it was difficult to use survival English.

Edited English and Refined Presentation

Since errors will not disappear if there is no pressure to remove them, Column two of the Teaching Log Record-Competence Communication-is relevant. At this stage, oral competence, rather than attitude or motivation, is emphasized. Teachers will focus their attention on those features that reflect the students' speaking ability and present level of English proficiency. Taken into consideration are such factors as pronunciation, intonation, fluency, tone of voice, stress, structure, choice of words and effectiveness of communication. The purpose here is to lead to better-polished English and to avoid "Survival-oriented English."

A student's actual score for oral communication comes from both active participation and oral ability. The Teaching Log Record conveys to students the idea that they must voluntarily throw themselves into the conversational pool and strive for effective communication.

After the Survival English stage, teachers should allow students to help their classmates edit and polish their language. One speaker after another can be asked to talk on the same topic or a different one. The point is to avoid errors and improve communicative skills.

Teachers should make clear to their students that the Teaching Log Record will form part of the oral-exam score. Let students know the log scores each month. In this way, students not only compete for better English but strive for more opportunities to speak. I've tried this strategy with a so-called "dumb" class and I'm happy to say they are now as active as the "most active" class I have had. They are also making rapid progress in oral English skills. When I see the most "quiet" and "timid" students courageously lead discussions and even organize classroom activities, I'm really impressed. On hearing their polished English, I realize with a smile that this strategy works.

"I can try it at least" is the feedback that I get from my new students. At the end of the semester, exam results confirm the strategy's effectiveness.

This three-step strategy tries to bring the students' speaking potential to the maximum. I am very pleased when they display positive self-images and their oral competence has been enhanced.'

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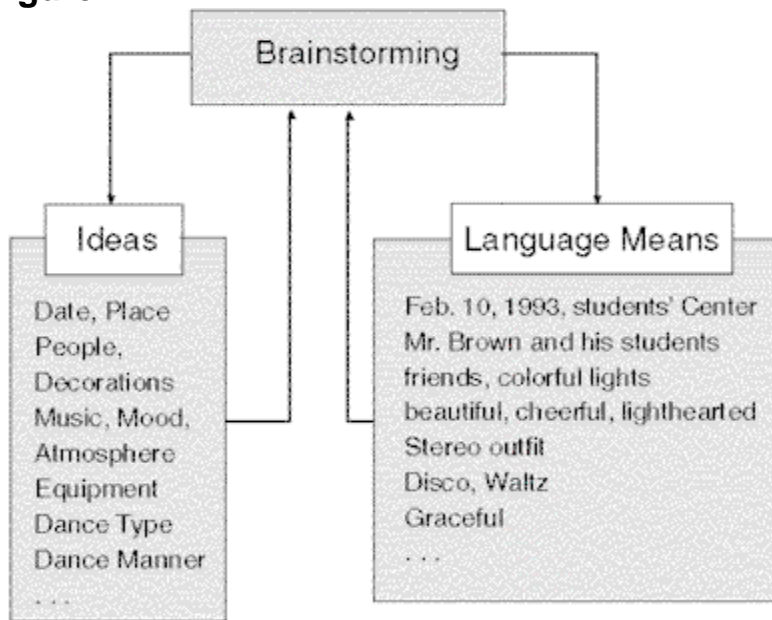
Figure 1

Figure 2

Teaching Log Record			
Course/Set	English Conversation		
Name	Survival English O.C.	Speaking Competence O.C.	Final Score
A	5	4	9
B	0	5	5
C	5	2	7
D	5	3	8